

THE VALUE OF ACCREDITATION: FOUR PIVOTAL ROLES

MAY 2003

ACCREDITATION IS THE PRIMARY MEANS BY WHICH INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES assure and improve quality. It has been in place for more than 100 years. The role of accreditation is extensive: 19 institutional accrediting organizations accredit approximately 6,300 institutions and more than 60 programmatic accrediting organizations (e.g., law, medicine, business) accredit approximately 17,500 programs. Accreditation is a private form of self-regulation that serves not only higher education itself, but also students, government, and the public.

Over time, accreditation has come to play four pivotal roles in U.S. society. Accreditation

- sustains and enhances the quality of higher education;
- maintains the academic values of higher education;
- is a buffer against the politicizing of higher education; and
- serves public interest and need.

Assuring and improving quality are fundamental to the strength and effectiveness of U.S. colleges and universities. Accreditation has been central to an ongoing commitment to excellence that characterizes the U.S. higher education enterprise.

Role 1: Sustaining and Enhancing the Quality of Higher Education

Accreditation is a significant factor in the success of higher education because it serves as a focal point for establishing a culture of quality in colleges and universities. This culture is developed in several ways. Accreditation serves as a gatekeeper for assuring a threshold level of quality when identifying institutions and programs that do not yet have sound academic and fiscal practices leading to quality operation. Accrediting organizations then work with these operations to remedy deficiencies prior to undertaking accreditation. Accreditation offers a primary incentive to improve quality through the requirement for periodic review of institutions and programs and a strong focus on achieving quality through constructive criticism and consultation rather than compliance. And, the accreditation process itself creates regional and national fora in which the higher education community honors its responsibility for quality, especially locating and sustaining a core of individuals who are particularly well informed and experienced about quality in higher education.

A. Gatekeeper for a Threshold Level of Quality

Attempting accreditation is a demanding experience. Accrediting organizations have a robust screening process for initial accreditation that sometimes involves “eligibility” standards—expectations that applicants are required to meet about the basic capacity to operate a higher education institution or program. Some accrediting organizations have a “pre-candidacy” or “candidacy” stage of accreditation—a period during which an institution or program is deemed a likely candidate for full accreditation, but must meet a rigorous set of academic expectations to achieve this status. The standards used by accrediting organizations for this initial accreditation call for thorough examination of all major functions of an institution or program. Achieving initial accreditation can take a matter of months or as much as four years or longer.

The major purpose of this screening process is to assure that institutions and programs seeking accreditation have sufficient capacity for academic quality. While not primarily intended as a tool for exclusion, accrediting organizations do not hesitate to inform institutions and programs of deficiencies that must be addressed to achieve initial accreditation. It is up to the applicant to meet the expectations of the accreditors at this early stage. Oftentimes this requires considerable work and investment of resources. The net result is that few, if any, institutions or programs lacking fundamental soundness join the community of accredited operations.

B. Primary Incentive for Quality Improvement

“Quality improvement” in accreditation refers to initiatives to strengthen all or part of an institution or program by identifying specific goals, developing capacity to achieve the goals, and evaluating whether the goals have been

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History of the Federal Linkage to Accreditation

This is a brief summary of the origins and history of federal reliance on accreditation for quality assurance. Accreditation began over a century ago as a wholly private and institutional activity. It was first handed a governmental linkage in 1952. The linkage was enhanced in 1965 and again in 1992. The reasons for this engagement are highly important. They apply today more so after half a century. It is notable that Congressional majorities and presidential administrations of both parties adopted this same approach. Government used self-regulatory and private actors that could do a public task better, cheaper, and without undue intrusion. This is still the correct formulation.

The education benefits of the “G I Bill” for World War II veterans provided an opportunity for fraud by new or sub-par higher education institutions that would provide little value to a whole new and unprecedented generation of veterans who suddenly became college students. The government could have certified acceptable schools itself, but chose instead to rely on private accreditation. This decision recognized the value of self-regulation and the limits of governmental suitability to make judgments about academic quality. This view was reaffirmed in 1965 when the first Higher Education Act (HEA) was enacted and again in 1992 when HEA was amended to give accreditation an important role in fighting new fraud and abuse problems in Title IV (Student Assistance) programs that had arisen in the 1970s and 1980s. Both HEA decisions were highly successful, just as the G I Bill decisions were decades earlier. The federal government did what it does best—provide funds and monitor fiscal compliance. And institutions of higher education, acting directly and through voluntary accreditation, did what they do best—provide and assure quality education.

Perhaps the best way to understand the value of the federal linkage to accreditation is to imagine—in the absence of private, voluntary accreditation—the federal government providing directly accreditation's four principal roles. How would the federal government go about providing directly these four valuable roles: enhancing quality, maintaining academic values, buffering against politicization, and serving public interest and need as the voluntary accreditation agencies now do. Surely, the federal government is poorly suited and ill equipped to do so.

Consider the following questions: Could federal employees or hired experts enhance institutional quality and maintain academic values as well as the present system of expert volunteers? (And who would pay the enormous additional costs?) Would institutions conduct self-studies and engage as peer-colleagues with visiting teams if they were direct federal representatives? Can federal inspectors serve as a buffer against political meddling in academic issues? Does the public benefit more from a direct governmental seal of approval than the current system of educators evaluating and assuring quality in higher education programs? In sum, such a change to a federalized system would produce a poorer outcome, and excessive governmental controls over academic decisions, at a far higher governmental cost—hardly a formula for good public policy.

While some might argue that state governments could assume this role, that proposition was placed in the HEA in 1992. It was labeled SPRE: State Postsecondary Review Entity. It produced a firestorm of protest when regulations were drafted and was promptly dropped by the Executive Branch. It was deleted from the HEA by the Congress with the support of the Administration in the 1998 HEA Amendments.

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Summary and Overview

ACCREDITATION IS THE PRIMARY MEANS BY WHICH COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES IN THE UNITED STATES assure and improve quality. It is a private form of self-regulation of higher education that has been in place for more than 100 years. Regional and national accreditors review entire institutions; specialized accreditors review programs ranging from law to social work to interior design. There are approximately 6,300 institutions and 17,500 programs with accredited status. Institutions and programs undergo accreditation reviews at regular intervals that may range from three years to ten years, depending on the accrediting organization.

The Four Roles of Accreditation

Accreditation has provided significant value to the higher education community and has served the public well over the years.

- 1. Accreditation sustains and enhances the quality of higher education.** Accreditation serves as a gatekeeper for a threshold level of quality through its screening functions of eligibility, candidacy for initial accreditation, and the grant of initial accreditation. Institutions and programs that lack sound academic and fiscal practices may not even be considered for accredited status nor will they receive initial accreditation. Accreditation enhances quality by requiring that institutions and programs routinely engage in quality improvement. Accreditation also provides major regional and national fora in which higher education faculty and administrators meet to identify and carry out their responsibilities for quality. This has, over time, produced a cadre of faculty and administrators who provide the needed talent for voluntary self-regulation.
- 2. Accreditation maintains the academic values of higher education.** The fundamental values of accreditation are institutional autonomy, academic freedom, commitment to degree education, general education, and collegial governance. These values allow institutions to independently pursue a diverse array of missions to serve diverse groups of students. The values also define the distinctiveness of U.S. higher education in relation to other countries and have been central to the high esteem in which U.S. higher education is held around the world.
- 3. Accreditation is a buffer against the politicizing of higher education.** The willingness and wisdom of federal and state government to rely on accreditation to assure academic quality has resulted in a measure of protection for institutions and programs against undue political influence in, e.g., faculty appointments or research.

4. Accreditation serves public interest and need. Accreditation assists students and families, government and employers when making key financial, personal, or career decisions related to higher education. Students and families report that accredited status is a significant factor when selecting a college, university, or program. Federal and state governments require accredited status when they provide taxpayer support for student grants and loans or institutional aid. Employers often require that new employees provide evidence of graduation from accredited institutions and programs as a condition of hire. And, they require that employees attend accredited institutions and programs as a condition of employer financial support for additional education.

How Accreditation Operates

The major features of accreditation are self-study, peer review, and a judgment about accredited status based on standards established by the accrediting organization. In the self-study, institutions and programs undertake a self examination of their academic and administrative operation based on standards established by an accrediting organization. Peer review is a process that engages faculty and administrators from outside an institution or program as well as public participants in the consideration of these same operations. This process includes examination of the self study mentioned above as well as a site visit to an institution or program. To maintain accredited status, institutions and programs must be reviewed periodically.

Accreditation standards are developed through consultation with key constituents in the academic community such as faculty and administrators accompanied by consultation with practitioners in various fields (especially for programmatic accreditation) and members of the public. Standards encompass the major activities of higher education: curriculum, faculty, academic standards, student services, and academic support. They focus on student learning outcomes and institution or program performance. Standards also address the fundamentals of operating a higher education institution or program such as financial stability, organization and governance, and facilities.

The accrediting organization, through its decision-making body, makes a judgment about whether an institution or program is to be accredited, the length of the accreditation period, and any special conditions that may attach to the accreditation. These same bodies may refuse to accredit an institution or program or withdraw accredited status under certain conditions. Accreditation decisions are complex and require careful analytic consideration of the varied dimensions of a higher education institution or program.

Why the Roles of Accreditation Are Important

The cumulative impact of accreditation carrying out the four roles of enhancing quality, maintaining academic values, buffering against politicization, and serving public interest and need is a robust system of self scrutiny and constructive self criticism of higher education. The accreditation system has strengthened the quality of higher education over time and served the public interest well. The accreditation community carries out these roles while, at the same time, committed to its own quality improvement through routinely and vigorously exploring additional means by which service to higher education, students, government, and the public can be further enhanced.

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achieved. Fundamental to quality improvement are the beliefs that quality once achieved must continue to be nurtured and that whatever the current level of quality, it is likely that an institution or program can go beyond this level in the future.

Quality improvement goes to the heart of the accreditation perception of itself as a mechanism for assuring quality through constructive criticism and consultation in contrast to assuring quality through compliance. Accrediting organizations routinely require institutions and programs to improve quality in the course of accreditation reviews. Ongoing action to improve quality is itself an indicator of quality. Quality improvement can also be carried out through a customization of accreditation reviews, an approach that is particularly valuable to comprehensive institutions seeking to focus on a few key areas of institutional operation. An institution may request a review focused on a particular area such as, e.g., general education or undergraduate education or distance learning. The goal is to go beyond minimum assurance of quality in a particular area over time.

C. Providing Major Regional and National Fora for Higher Education Quality

Accreditation may be the most significant single place to which higher education professionals with a major interest in quality assurance and improvement routinely gravitate. Participation in the accreditation experience has, over time, created a core of professionals who are well-versed and thoughtful about assuring quality in higher education. This supplements and enhances the considerable quality review activity that takes place within institutions and programs.

Accreditation provides for an extraordinary exchange of expertise across institutions and professions. All major phases of the accreditation review require informed and experienced professionals in higher education. Faculty and administrators, for example, write self studies, serve on peer review teams across a range of institutions and programs, and serve on accrediting decision-making bodies.

Role 2: Maintaining the Academic Values of Higher Education

Accreditation functions to reinforce academic values of higher education such as institutional autonomy, academic freedom, commitment to degree education, general education, and collegial governance. Accreditation reinforces the value of institutional autonomy through its emphasis on a mission-based approach to quality review. Accreditation buttresses the value of academic freedom by its strong support for the authority of faculty in all matters academic. Accreditation provides a firm foundation for the value of the degree and general education when requiring that institutions to be accredited are both degree-granting and offer general education. This requirement of institutional accreditation for the degree and general education also extends to many programs within an institution. For example, a good number of the specialized accreditors require that their programs be located in institutions that have been accredited by regional or national organizations. In many instances, this means that these programs themselves must commit to a structure that includes degrees and general education. Finally, accreditation itself, as a collegial process of peer review, models the value of shared governance.

These academic values have sustained a remarkable higher education enterprise with a great variety of institutional types that house diverse purposes and missions. U.S. higher education includes public and private institutions, two-year and four-year institutions, open admission and highly selective institutions, large and comprehensive research universities, community colleges, liberal arts colleges, state colleges and universities, and vocational/technical schools. These institutions serve the most diverse array of students in the world. They balance a profound democratic commitment to access while providing a world standard for quality.

Role 3: Buffering the Politicizing of Higher Education

Accreditation has long served as a protective barrier against the politicization or undue influence of politics in higher education. This is in part because of the willingness of federal and state government to rely on accreditation to assure academic quality rather than taking on this responsibility themselves. Institutions and programs can develop new initiatives and enhance academic quality without having to address purely political concerns.

The federal government is precluded by law from direct involvement in the determination of academic quality in higher education. However, the federal government invests considerable public resources in colleges and universities,

including \$60 billion annually in the federal student grant and loan programs alone. To assure that these taxpayer dollars are spent wisely, the federal government requires that students attend institutions and programs that are accredited by an organization that the government has reviewed and approved. The federal government, in effect, subcontracts with accrediting organizations to assure academic quality.

State governments provide more than \$63 billion annually for operating expenses as well as providing additional billions for capital expenditure for higher education institutions. While states do have authority and responsibility for a range of features of higher education, they, too, often defer to accrediting organizations on matters of academic quality.

With so much money at stake each year, the potential to politicize decisions about colleges and universities is real. There are, for example, arenas of government decision making in higher education that are routinely criticized for the influence of politics. Federal research funds is one area and some state decisions about the location of new campuses is another. In contrast, the political influence on matters of academic quality has been small. This is, in the main, attributable to the role that accreditation has come to play and the extent to which government relies on accreditation.

Role 4: Serving Public Interest and Need

Accreditation has long assisted students and families, employers, and government with threshold decisions about higher education. These constituents are aware that institutions and programs that are accredited provide benefits not available from operations without this status. Students and families often seek to confirm that an institution or program is accredited when, e.g., students make decisions about college or university attendance. Moreover, they believe that attendance at an accredited (vs. unaccredited) institution or program is an important element in educational mobility. Employers often require that employees seeking financial assistance to attend college provide proof that the college is accredited.

Accreditation is serving public need and interest when, as indicated above, federal and state governments require that an institution or program be accredited in order to receive taxpayer funds. Taxpayers, as well as students and families, have assurance that public funds are being invested only in programs and institutions that meet generally recognized quality standards. While accrediting organizations, by design, review and sanction a range of quality and play a formative role in improving quality, constituents can nonetheless be confident that accrediting organizations establish at least threshold expectations of quality and that accreditors are vigilant to their ongoing review of the quality of institutions and programs. Constituents can rely on the rigor, integrity, and consistency that characterize accreditation review.

Finally, public interest and need are served by the other roles of accreditation that are discussed above. Keeping higher education strong through accreditation's attention to quality, commitment to academic values, and suitable distance from the political realm all contribute to the viable higher education enterprise that students, government, and the public seek and deserve.

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Accreditation is part of a large and complex system of accountability by which higher education assures its worth and effectiveness to the society. Accreditation's four pivotal roles—sustaining and enhancing the quality of higher education, maintaining the values of higher education, buffering the politicization of higher education, and serving public interest and need—have been fundamental to establishing and maintaining a system of higher education that is vibrant, resilient, and responsive to the society it serves.



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